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SONG OF THE MIGRANTS

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## SONG OF THE MIGRANTS

NORMAN BOLKER

Down in the Wabash jungles outside Birmingham,  
in the roadside gully lined with lank grass,  
festooned with orange tin cans—  
in the lush jungle lying outside Birmingham  
14 'boes are resting, sitting on their haunches,  
singing, telling stories, washing socks,  
cooking up slumgullion, mulligan, coffee,  
or loafing with their dusty brogans turned up in the sun.  
Old Leatherface with blue denim, felt hat that never saw a crease;  
Listen to it!

*Listen to the jingle, the ramble and the roar  
as she glides along the woodland  
through the hills and by the shore.*

*Hear the mighty rush of engine,  
hear the lonesome hobo's squall  
while traveling through the jungles on the Wabash Cannonball.*

Go easy, pal, go easy.

Crouch low against the wind  
or the wigin-waggin tread boards on this here fruit express  
will have you pinned under some sharp wheel like Hardhead Pete  
last year. He had his leg cut off before he knew it, and bled  
to death. Good God, the redness jelled on him.

His face was long, longer than I ever saw a man's.

Go easy, pal, go easy, find an open door on an empty freight  
or clutch the eaves of this half-filled coal gondola.

*In the old rock candy mountains  
where you never wear no socks,  
there are birds and the bees in the cigarette trees  
and alcohol trickles down the rocks.*

Give me your Durham, brother.

I'll spill some grains in the paper and roll me a smoke,  
while we're highballin' out,  
loaded with bridge spurs, girders, cables,  
for we're barrelin' out for some deep ravine  
in Nevada or Montana, to throw that steel across it.  
Over here in Utah I'm a dragline man,

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oilin' out my diesel, wheeling on the centerpin,  
workin' them pistons top speed as I lower the boom,  
drop my clam into the creek, and take a chaw out.  
It's a soft bite into the black gumbo.  
It's a sweet delicious mouthful, a greedy thrust.  
Spoonin' out the alluvia, I see the water green  
rush in the hole, as I dish out the mud from the creek bed onto the  
banks.  
I'm wearing a denim cap with a bill, for I'm a dragline operator.  
Yessir. I'll move rivers or put the groundwork for viaducts,  
overpasses or super highways—earth dams in Montana.  
\$1.37 an hour; I'm in the union.  
Or did you ever see me pull down the side of a mountain?  
I'll take the Letournels, lurching behind the 500-horse cats,  
scraping swaths through the land.  
I'll take the biggest bite you ever did see—  
5 ton at a time, as we lunge along  
with my diesel cat roaring, shaking the earth,  
leaving her measured track behind,  
the Letournel gorging, just lapping up the ground,  
with our air line intact, hydraulics set, and our tension spring  
just right.  
God, we'll make a road through here in no time.  
*Oh, if you want to get to heaven,  
I'll tell you how to do it.  
Grease your feet in some mutton suet.  
Grab your sweetheart by the hand  
and slide right over to the Promise' Land.  
Go easy, take it easy, but go greasy . . .*  
And on that August afternoon we threshed  
the wheat and oats from the Dakotas, Iowa  
and south into Kansas.  
The combines sickled down the stalks like death.  
How the sweat poured down our backs, the horse smell,  
and the sing of pitchfork tines as they slipped through  
the barley straws when we pitched the dry bundles into wagons  
and fed them to the polished threshing trough.  
The gobble as the huff-puffer gulped the bundles  
and the grain dust flew—acid—stinging in your lungs and eyes,  
mingling with your sweat to make a pungent wine.

PRAIRIE SCHOONER

And the sun, glinting off the goggles of the machine crew  
as they straightened the long belts and squirted streams of oil  
at integral parts.

The way we stretched back muscles, threw our arms into every  
pitch, came out the chute with the billion bags of sacked grain.

Then, that fall, we shucked the corn of Nebraska,  
grabbing the dry ears, twisting them off,  
tearing the shucks, knocking off the dust  
and banging the hard ears into the wagons.

As the soil fell through our shoe tops  
the dry rustle of the wind and the knocked down stalks as the  
plumes of smoke wisped through the autumn air . . .

I'll sing you one you can dance, brother.

You can flap your arms and shake your feet, yahoo.

*Oh, the grasshopper sat on the Santa Fe's back,*

*Oh, 'twas a mighty struggle . . .*

Come, brother, we'll go out and pick apples in Washington  
or down in the Imperial Valley, there are peaches,  
plums, pears or maybe grapefruit.

Three crops a year, brother, the ground's so fat  
it drips from you: the fruit so huge, it's wet with juice.

Come, brother, the sun shines 14 hours a day  
and blue water runs through the orchards,  
piped 700 miles from Grand Coulee dam.

Yessirree, biggest in the world.

You won't believe it, Bud. That ground is rich.

It's ripe with germs that get so thick they squeeze  
themselves to death and change to soggy humus.

Now look, brother, you're picking in three shifts,  
the fruit grows so fast. Why, each hour minute second  
a leaf cell is dividing, subdividing, subdividing,  
each chromosome splitting two exact in two,  
each chloroplast whipping round the cell, getting fatter,  
and the leaves bustin', tearin' the trees apart,  
and the fruit that blossoms out—

God, the drive is terrific . . .

*Down in old happy hollow,*

*there's a banjo strummin'*

*some bums are hummin'*

*their way home.*

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Half a mile down the track  
there's a freight train comin'  
some bums are bummin'  
their way home.  
So lift your pick, Joe, drive it in.  
Tear out that ballast rock.  
The gandy dancer's movin' in.  
We'll build a lock between tracks and earth  
so's you can never tear apart.  
Up incline, decline, on a rocky plane,  
or through a valley in Wyoming. We don't care.  
Give us a shovel, spill the ballast our way.  
We'll lay them ties and put them rails over.  
Hell, we don't care; we'll wrench on friction plates  
and build trestles over any gully known to man.  
Don't worry, keep them engines roaring.  
Pull your throttle out, all the way.  
Every rotten tie and weakened rail has been replaced all the way  
to Pocatello.  
We would of gone up farther but the freeze came in early that year.  
*John Henry, he was a steel drivin' man,  
he died with a hammer in his han'.*  
*Oh, come along boys and line up the track,  
for John Henry, he ain't never comin' back.*  
Outside Scranton there were 250 cars of iron ore and coal.  
We took that iron over the chutes and tripped out  
the bottom of the car and emptied them in no time.  
But the air was red with dust and stained your eyeballs,  
and damned if we didn't taste the metal for two months.  
Then we worked that coal—  
grabbed by hand anthracite so heavy  
you cramped your guts each time you lifted one.  
Hard! Christ build me a tombstone from the stuff.  
The massive black will last forever.  
But burn—there's nothing like it for good steel.  
Then we took the soft coal (you can shovel that),  
and poured rivulets of slack down them chutes  
where it ground and ground its way into the bins.  
The dust that rose up painted on your skin.  
It covered until only eyes showed out.

PRAIRIE SCHOONER

Somehow the stuff would get between your teeth.  
I blew my nose out black. They say your lungs  
get solid with the stuff in time. You heard me cough.  
I think that I'll go West and hay next year.  
*From the foaming Colorado and the sands of Santa Fe,  
From New York to St. Louis and Denver by the way,  
From the hills of Minnesota where the ripplin' waters fall,  
No changes can be taken on that Wabash Cannonball.*  
Pass me that bottle, brother, I'll take another swig.  
I saved me up my money this summer  
and now that frost is hardening up the ground,  
I'll go in town and spend the winter there.  
Oh, I'll get me some new overalls and underwear,  
find some flophouse or cheap hotel on skid-row.  
(Them birds are flyin'. It'll be a cold one this time.)  
Then I'll buy myself some liquor.  
There's a warm stove in the pool hall and there's always conver-  
sation,  
and the women—yippee . . .  
It's darker now. Sing us another song, brother.  
There's a slow freight on the MoP. at 9:15.  
I think I'll loop it down to San Antone.

“THE TOO MUCH LOVED EARTH”

ALAN SWALLOW

The red leaf smoulders in its grave.  
Uphill the gaunt pines blacken, die  
Their rigid death, with overhead  
The innocent and startling sky.

The bronze earth turns and changes face.  
One season builds its vernal tide.  
What ancient wash, what flameless fire  
Is this that holds the mountainside?